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Comparative Analysis of the Depiction of Gender Roles in A League of Their Own

by Kristin Liewald

(English 1154)

In today's society, one may justifiably observe stark differences in not only the male and female sexes, but more importantly, their genders. In fact, it is not the existence of these differences that is often questioned, but rather their origin. While some may argue that gender differences stem from biological tendencies, Aaron Devor suggests in his essay "Gender Role Behaviors and Attitudes" that the gender constructs of western society are fueled by cultural guidelines (458). Indeed, an overwhelmingly prominent and influential piece of our culture is media, and even more specifically, film. But just how effective is film in dictating the norms of culture? After consuming Penny Marshall's A League of Their Own, one may find that the answer is all but negligible.

To begin, it is crucial to denote the characteristics that separate the male and female genders. In "Gender Role Behaviors and Attitudes," Aaron Devor offers that the male sex coincides with masculinity, while the female sex is constituted by femininity (458). One aspect indicative of masculinity is aggression and competition for dominance (458). According to Devor, these characteristics are utilized by males as a protective mechanism against feminine characteristics such as vulnerability (462). Indeed, the males in the film A League of Their Own exhibited aggression, especially towards females. This aggression was exercised in numerous ways, including sarcasm, yelling, and lack of emotion. Ernie Capadino, a recruiter for the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League, quickly becomes notorious for his rude and dehumanizing antics. In an attempt to persuade Dottie Hinson to play baseball, he bluntly informs her, "You're kind of a doll, that's what we're lookin' for." To every woman he confronts he is pushy and abrupt, like when he says, "See how it works is, the train moves, not the station" to Marla Hooch when he wants her on the train. After tryouts, one of the head male coaches snaps at a woman when she is the last to be standing in front of the rosters, embarrassing her to the point where she cries. Jimmy Dugan, one of the main roles in the film as the Rockford Peaches' coach, is also impetuous in his crude remarks. In one scene, baseball player Evelyn performs a wrong play, which Jimmy responds to by yelling at her. As a result, Evelyn cries and initiates Jimmy's famous declaration: "There's no crying in baseball!" Sexual aggression is even depicted in the film when a young male pursues Dottie to "make a man out of him" in his car in front of a roadhouse (A League of Their Own).

While cultural guidelines encourage males to be aggressive and demonstrate egotistical dominance, Devor suggests females are taught to be passive and submissive (458). The direct opposite of male notions, females are supposed to achieve cooperation and fluidity in interactions (458-459). Without fail, A League of Their Own portrayed female politeness on multiple occasions. While numerous women were verbally harassed by Ernie the recruiter, they remained amiable and compliant, or meekly disregarded the treatment. Only in one instance did Dottie object, "You know something? You're not very nice." As most people would react to such a weak retort, Ernie laughed at her. In the previously mentioned situation where a head coach bellowed at the isolated and noticeably confused woman, the issue was not alleviated until a fellow female player placidly consoled the crying woman. There, through calm conversation, it was discovered that the woman did not know how to read, but that she did in fact make a team. Subsequent to the realization, the relieved young woman joined the mass of supporting females for further male-dominated instruction (A League of Their Own).

Furthermore, Devor argues that "North American society reserves highly valued attributes for

males and actively supports the high evaluating of any characteristics which might inadvertently become associated with maleness” (459). According to Devor, male superiority in society is a result of natural dominance and roughness (459). Undoubtedly, *A League of Their Own* reflects this perspective. Every respectable position in the film was upheld by a male, such as Mr. Harvey, the wealthy initiator of the league and owner of his own chocolate company. In fact, every occupation in the film was held by a male, including the bus driver, coaches, soldiers away at war, the blues band in the road house, and the doctor who cared for the food-poisoned female accompanying the Rockford Peaches. A decision was rarely made in the film without the valued consent of a male, and the women were always subordinate to the men. For example, when the disgruntled bus driver quit due to Evelyn’s son’s frantic misbehavior, the women depended on Jimmy Dugan to operate the vehicle. Devor explains that men are to exude “toughness, confidence, and self-reliance,” and strive for respectable stature and success (461). One can safely conclude that, for this reason, Jimmy Dugan did not want, nor take the coaching position seriously when presented to him by Mr. Harvey. Because he predicted the position would not be a respected one, he allowed his alcoholism to shine through at the games (when he was not sleeping, of course). None of the men in the film displayed anything remotely similar to dependence on a woman. Even after impressive and hard-earned success in their first baseball season, Mr. Harvey matter-of-factly states “Look at these girls. I don’t need them, but I love them” (*A League of Their Own*).

On the opposite end of the spectrum, women are to strive for the goals of femininity, which are defined by Devor as “warm and continued relationships with men, a sense of maternity, interest in caring for children, and the capacity to work productively and continuously in female occupations” (qtd. in “Gender Role”). There is even a social schema that entrances sole female responsibilities in maternity, which is achieved through submission to men for stability and protection (463). Even from the beginning of the film, which reflected the ways of the year 1992 before regressing into 1943, Dottie and her daughter were at home with Dottie’s two grandsons. Previous to their departure, the mother of the boys instructs them to behave for the babysitter, who is also female. Later in the film, after the interaction with the recruiter, Dottie explains to her younger sister, Kit, that she was happily married and did not want to “confuse things” by playing baseball. Dottie and Kit are also seen fulfilling their duties on the farm, which include, caring for the animals, preparing food, and setting the table. The film also provided an excerpt from a radio recording, where a well-dressed and pompous woman declared women’s baseball the “masculinization of women,” that it promoted “sexual confusion,” and would have consequences to “the home, the children, and our country.” In addition, the film offered commercials for the girls’ baseball league, which advertised the women’s skills in the kitchen, knitting, and pageantry. One scene, which proves to be particularly amusing, was comprised of Evelyn literally begging Jimmy for permission to bring her young son on road trips because her husband was too busy “reading the want ads” (*A League of Their Own*). Even her husband’s unemployment took precedent over Evelyn’s once-in-a-lifetime, historic opportunity.

However, feminine roles are not only to maintain a household. Rather than exemplifying power, women are to demonstrate their heterosexual orientation that “requires women to dress, move, speak, and act in ways that men will find attractive” (Devor, 460). Women are to be sexually available, and sexual objectification was readily evident in the film. Devor shares that an individual may appear non-threatening, vulnerable, and attractive (or feminine) by making themselves look smaller, such as keeping their legs together, keeping their toes pointed correctly, smiling, or gesticulating adolescent gestures (460). The importance of suggestive appearance was also stressed in the film, in that every female player was to attend mandatory beauty and charm school. In fact, the women were told by Mr. Harvey’s assistant that “everyone in this league is going to be a lady.” Preceding this requirement, there was another—uniforms. Instead of wearing regular regulation baseball uniforms, the women were forced to wear revealing baseball skirts, to which there was much objection. One of the fiery players, Doris Murphey, questioned, “What do you think we are,

ballplayers or ballerinas?” Her teammate Dottie was also concerned, since she had to catch in the provocative attire. It should also be duly noted that one of the prominent requirements to be accepted into the league was appearance, to which skill came second. Marla Hooch demonstrated to the recruiter that she was an above-excellent player, an ambidextrous one that her fellow male teammates feared. In his conversation with the recruiter, Marla’s father explained “If she was a boy, I’d be in New York talking to the Yankees.” However, Marla’s appearance did not fit the social norm—she wore baggy clothes, a baseball cap, an obviously paid little attention to hair and makeup. As a result, the recruiter immediately disregarded her incredible talent based on her appearance. Only after the diligent persuasion of Marla’s father, Dottie, and Kit, was Ernie the recruiter willing to accept Marla. At another point in the film, Mr. Harvey was considering the discontinuation of the baseball league as a result of the lack of profit he was experiencing. Upon this information, the girls attempted to attract audiences, with their main strategy being flaunting their flesh. Sure enough, with a few kisses on the cheek and landing in the splits while catching pop fouts, the women ultimately aggregated ballparks full of fans (A League of Their Own).

In closing, after viewing A League of Their Own, Aaron Devor’s accusations of gender types being learned through the projections of society appear accurate. Not only are males thoroughly depicted as the dominant gender through their own attributes, but women appear considerably submissive in their demeanors. All of the occupations or positions of importance were upheld by men. Meanwhile, women maintained the households, and one woman even brought her son on road trips to inhibit the distraction of her husband from job hunting. Throughout the film, the men spoke (more often yelled) to the women with blatant disrespect and sarcasm, to which the women remained polite and subordinate to avoid confrontation. The importance of the appearance of genders was also depicted in the film. Women were portrayed as vulnerable sexual objects, from being forced to play baseball in skirts, to meeting the requirements of mandatory beauty classes in order to play in the league. One woman’s outstanding baseball skills were almost completely overlooked as a result of her negligent appearance (A League of Their Own). When comparing the A League of Their Own with other pieces of literature or media in today’s society, one may justifiably witness striking similarities in regards to the gender constructs they exhibit. Given the power the media holds in western society, it is an attainable concept that the functionalities it offers are accepted, right or wrong, within our lifestyles.

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